

# DEVELOPING A PROFILE OF RELIGIONS IN MALAYSIA FOR INTER-FAITH DISCOURSES

(Philosophy and Civilization – Inter-Faith Relations)

Dr. Haslina Ibrahim<sup>1</sup>  
Department of Usuluddin & Comparative Religion  
Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge & Human Sciences  
International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)  
P.O.Box 10 50728 KUALA LUMPUR  
[haslina@iium.edu.my](mailto:haslina@iium.edu.my)  
603-61965746 (P)  
603-61964542 (F)

Malaysians need more than historical explanation to substantiate the reasons for their coexistence and understanding of each other. This paper is to share part of our research endeavor in gathering and managing data on religions in Malaysia through an academic research. Using a combination of approaches; we try to go beyond the phenomenological approach in developing a profile of religions in Malaysia. We have identified two major categories as the criteria for the profile; the permanent and the dynamic. The permanent pertains to; God as the Creator, the universe and creation, the relationship between the creator and the creation, the concept of good and evil and the destiny of the universe. The dynamic pertains to the philosophy, concept, notion, and methods and approaches for understanding the permanent. This paper therefore advocates the profile as potential standard for embarking into inter-faith discourses among religions in Malaysia.

## Introduction

One may ask if it is necessary to develop a profile of religions and how it may contribute positively to inter-faith discourses in Malaysia. Experts in the field of religions would inquire if the methods adopted for developing the profile are feasible, objective and scientific enough. (Thoha, 2009)<sup>2</sup> To answer these questions, it is essential to acknowledge beforehand that plurality of religions is a universal phenomenon and that it has been increasingly drawing human attention. Plurality in Malaysia however, has always been explained as the byproduct of history, an ‘acceptable reality’ substantiated through what has always been propagated as a ‘social

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Haslina Ibrahim serves the Department of Usuluddin & Comparative Religion, IIUM. Her areas of interest are Comparative Religion, Inter-Faith Relation and Da’wah. She is currently working on a fundamental research on religions in Malaysia funded by the Ministry of Higher Education. She expects to develop a framework for inter-faith relation in the Malaysian context. Her major research interest however is to develop a feasible approach and method in reconciling between Comparative Religion and Islamic Theology (Usuluddin).

<sup>2</sup> The Western conception of objectivity promotes the idea of ‘value-freeness’ which means that the researcher’s “belief” or “religion” should not intervene in the process of studying other religions. (Thoha, 2009), pp. 85-87.

contract’.<sup>3</sup> In the context of inter-faith relation in Malaysia, we however, suggest moving beyond such a historical explanation to a more systematic, organized and novel line of reasoning. In this regard we propose to work on a scheme to explain plurality of religions in Malaysia. Our highest aim is to enlighten the understanding on the following inter-faith jargons; religious truth, religious right, equality and freedom, and religious values.

By the Malaysian context, we mean the national, social-economic-political and historical background of Malaysia.<sup>4</sup> It also means that we take into account the Federal Constitution of Malaysia<sup>5</sup> and the current debate on the interpretation of the Federal constitution.<sup>6</sup> We positively support the 1Malaysia notion claimed to be the national agenda for promoting unity among people of different races, cultures and religions in Malaysia. We take it critically if the notion of ‘social contract’ contributes positively or negatively to national unity in general and inter-faith relation in Malaysia in particular.

By inter-faith discourses, we refrain from limiting the meaning to inter-faith dialogue for the former including various types of inter-faith intellectual and academic engagement in terms of publication, forum, workshop, discussions, roundtables, seminars, conferences, dialogue and debate.

The profile we aim to develop is however, detached from the currently influential philosophy of pluralism<sup>7</sup> that propagates ‘diversity based on relativism’.<sup>8</sup> Considering the huge and complex

---

<sup>3</sup> In Malaysia, the issue of social contract arises in the context of Malay and non-Malay relationship in Malaysia as spelled out in the Article 14-18 and the Article 153 of the Federal Constitution. The former states the issues concerning the citizenship of the Non-Malay and the latter states the special privileges and special rights of the Malays. For details refer to (Asma, 2003) and (Bari, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Our scope of research therefore is limited to the four major religions in Malaysia; Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity taking into account divisions within particular religions.

<sup>5</sup> Citing the Federal Constitution, Islam is the religion mentioned in the constitution and that other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation. *Constitution of Malaysia*, Article 3 (1).

<sup>6</sup> The very recently debate on whether Islam is the official religion of Malaysia for there are stipulations that Islam is mentioned as the religion of Federation and not the official religion.

<sup>7</sup> Pluralism is generally defined as the awareness of the legitimate co-existence of systems of thought, life, and action, which on the other hand, are judged incompatible among themselves. (Panikkar, 1995)

religious data,<sup>9</sup> we formulated two guiding categories that classify the bulk of religious data; the permanent and the dynamic. By permanent we mean the fundamental, fixed and the unchangeable aspect of religion which may also covers its metaphysics, doctrines and creeds. By ‘dynamic’ we mean the philosophy, notion and conception of the permanent that help to deliberate, clarify and substantiate understanding on the propagated ‘truth’ in one religion. The categories we proposed are innovative and novel in nature and help to devise a profile of religions in Malaysia. In the end we aim the profile to be objective, systematic and academic, and to become a potential feeder for embarking into inter-faith discourses in Malaysia.

### **The Needs For The Profile**

As far as the study on religions in Malaysia is concerned, there has yet been an attempt to describe religions in Malaysia using a systematic and organized approach. Works on religions in Malaysia<sup>10</sup> were published some time ago and they were generally descriptive and phenomenological in nature. Indeed, the globally accepted approach in the study is the phenomenological approach introduced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>11</sup> The phenomenological approach seeks to study religion objectively as a phenomenon. Two interrelated and significant aspects about the phenomenological approach therefore are to study religion objectively and to study religion as a phenomenon.

The phenomenological approach maintains that the study of religion has to be executed fairly and objectively, away from biasness and prejudice. For example, a Muslim researcher who studies Christianity should avoid using Islam or any other religions, as the basis for

---

<sup>8</sup> This philosophy perceives multiplicity as a conflicting phenomenon and therefore seeks to reconcile the conflict. As a way out of the conflict, the philosophy propagates that every religions made an equally valid claim to the Truth and as such no religion can claim superior over the others. Refer to (Bryne, 1995)

<sup>9</sup> The 4 major religions in Malaysia that fall under the research scope are Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity.

<sup>10</sup> Among these are *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia: Religions and Belief* (Hasan, 2008), *Religions in Malaysia* (Mohd Sulaiman, 2006), *Chinese Belief and Practices in South East Asia: Studies on the Chinese in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore* (Chiew, 1993), *Religious Freedom, Minorities and Islam: an Inquiry into the Malaysian Experience* (F. Yousif, 1998) and *Religion In West Malaysia and Singapore* (Corfield, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> The phenomenological method is reflected in the work of a number of European specialists in religions dating from the late nineteen to the mid twentieth centuries. (James, 1995), for details on the phenomenological method see also (Smart, 1973)

understanding Christianity. Using the phenomenological distinctive method *epoche* or ‘suspension of judgment’, one has to suspend judgment when studying religions other than his own.<sup>12</sup>

Studying religion as a phenomenon is to study religion as it is perceived and consciously experienced by its adherent. In this regard, the study is neither an ontological,<sup>13</sup> epistemological,<sup>14</sup> theological,<sup>15</sup> nor ethical<sup>16</sup> enquiry. The phenomenological method on the other hand, is an empirical enquiry that seeks to explain religious phenomenon as observed and experienced by the human senses.

The profile of religions in Malaysia appreciates the phenomenological method in so far as it helps to describe religions and its’ religious adherents’ religious experience. However, being descriptive and explanatory, the phenomenological approach avoids judgment. In this regard, questions of ‘religious truth claim’ are away from the phenomenological interest.

In the Malaysian context, ‘plural religious truth claim’ is hardly an academic debate. At public level, most of the time, plurality of religions are tolerated as a byproduct of history to avoid potential religious conflicts and dissensions. Coincidentally, at present, some Malaysians accept religious pluralism as the philosophy that substantiates the cause for co-existence of religions in Malaysia. However, this philosophy that advocates for equality of religions receives criticism particularly from among the Muslim community.<sup>17</sup>

The profile we intend to develop however shies away from religious pluralism. It moves beyond the historical reason and the limit of phenomenological explanation. It seeks to underscore the plural-truth claim made by religion a pertinent issue in a meaningful academic and intellectual

---

<sup>12</sup> *Epoche* is derived from the Greek word *epechô*, is suspension of judgment; the exclusion from one’s mind of every possible presupposition. *Epoche*’ is needed to abstain from every kind of value-judgment, to be pure and impartial.

<sup>13</sup> The ontological approach on religion seeks to vindicate the existence of the Ultimate, its reality, essence and nature.

<sup>14</sup> The epistemological approach on religion seeks to study religion as the source of knowledge.

<sup>15</sup> The theological approach on religion is a systematic study of religion and the nature of religious truth.

<sup>16</sup> The ethical approach seeks to study religion from ethical perspective.

<sup>17</sup> Criticism among Muslim community rises when religious pluralism propagates all religions make an equally valid claim to the Truth and no one religion can exert superiority over the other.

inter-faith discourse that examines religious truth, religious right, equality and freedom, and religious values within the local and national set up.

### **The Methods Adopted and The Respondents**

To gather the data on religions, we adopted in-depth interviews with selected and qualified representatives of religious organizations in Malaysia. Questions were open ended, structured and sent to respondents to be reviewed and studied. (refer to appendix I) Prior to the real interviews, meetings were arranged to discuss whether the questions are adequate, clear, and well understood by the respondents. The real interviews were properly planned and videoed to avoid inaccuracy of data on the part of respondents and reporting on the part of the researcher.

For data analysis, we appreciate a combination of methods, theological, ontological, epistemological, logical, ethical and phenomenological. Religions and religious data are complex entities that limiting to one particular method will restrict research findings. Our conviction is that to be regarded ambitious is worthier than to suppress potential means to knowledge due to obsession or indifferent attitude to a particular method.

The respondents chosen in this research are restricted to 4 major religious adherents in Malaysia; the Muslims, the Buddhists, the Hindus and the Christians. Their representatives were identified from religious organizations they affiliated to. To ensure accuracy of data, we make certain that the respondents are religious practitioner, well-informed/taught about his religion, leaders in the respective organization and appreciate inter-faith engagement.

### **The Categories and The Profile**

The category of 'permanent and dynamic' has been triggered by the work entitled *Al-Fikr al-Dini fi Muwajahat Tahaddiyat al-Hadathah*. (Fattah, 2002). The author was concerned to accentuate the dynamic nature of the Islamic religious thought.<sup>18</sup> He propagates that religion in itself is characterized with a sense of finitudeness and dependence. Islamic religious thought on the other hand in facing the challenges of modernity is an open avenue for drawing analogies and

---

<sup>18</sup> He propagates that religion in itself is characterized with a sense of finitudeness and dependence. Islamic religious thought on the other hand in facing the challenges of modernity is an open avenue for drawing analogies and references to convergences, between the different systems evolved in world religions, . (Fattah, 2002)

references to convergences, between the different systems evolved in world religions. (Fattah, 2002) He however did not develop the theory further. We are therefore honored to revisit, examine and apply the category through a meaningful research endeavor on issues pertaining to religions and inter-faith relations. We postulate that every religion is subject to finitude characteristic and every religious thought therefore is subject to openness. The finitude characteristics are epitomized by the permanent and the openness are epitomized by the dynamic.

A theoretical assumption of 'the permanent and the dynamic' is proposed as a systematic category to describe religions in Malaysia. 'The permanent' pertains to fundamentals themes deliberated in every religion for they seek to explain the following; the Ultimate/God as the Creator, the creation/cosmos, the purpose of creation/life, the notion of good and bad and the destiny of creation/cosmos. These fundamentals which are the enablers for further enquires pertain to religious truth, religious right, equality and freedom, and religious values. We therefore assume that the five fundamentals are common and relevant to all the religions under study.

The dynamic relates to the important facets; the philosophy, notion, and conception that explain the permanent (fundamental themes itemized under the permanent) and the methods and approaches in actualizing or acting upon the fundamentals.

To illustrate, taking Buddhism as an example, we regard that the Buddhist philosophy, notion and conception on the fundamentals are indeed the dynamic aspects of Buddhism; the Ultimate/God as Creator, the creation which include living and non-living beings and their relationship with the Ultimate/God, conceptions on good and evil, and conceptions on the destiny of creation.

Another facet of the dynamics is the methods and approaches used in Buddhism in the acquisition of a particular philosophy, notion and conception that explain the permanent whether they are rational, empirical, revelational, inspirational, meditational, and experiential etc.

The above two facets are regarded as the dynamics because of their active, vigorous, flexible and diverse nature. The two facets make religion align with history to appreciate the fact that human knowledge and his methods of understanding religion can never be static but continue to grow.

The facets therefore make it possible for man to review and to enhance his understanding on religion.

Indeed questions of religious truth, right, equality, freedom, and values are shaped by the dynamics. For example, the Muslim philosophy, notion and conception of God may help to deliberate on the meaning of religious truth and religious right in Islam. Once the question of truth and right is well deliberated, it defines the position and relation of Islam to other religious truth. To illustrate, Allah is the Creator and He is understood as the Creator of the universe which includes the living and non-living being. Therefore He is the God of everybody and everything. Therefore, as Islam and Muslim basically mean to submit to the fact that He is the Creator, that He is not an exclusive God to a particular being. Allah the Universal Creator therefore is the Universal God and it is on this basis, the truth-claim made by other religions is challenged but not their existence. Followers of other religions can rightly co-exist for they are also creations of Allah. They are granted freedom to think and to choose what they perceive appropriate under which they will be made responsible. The right choice man makes should be guided by religion so that the values he adopts are positive values. On the other hand, if man chooses values not recommended by religion, he adopts negative values. Man is therefore expected to make the right choice for it leads him to his expected destiny; happiness in the hereafter. If he chooses otherwise, he will end up in misery.

### The Profile And Inter-Faith Discourses In Malaysia

Using the categories, we develop the following profile of religions in Malaysia (refer to Table 1)

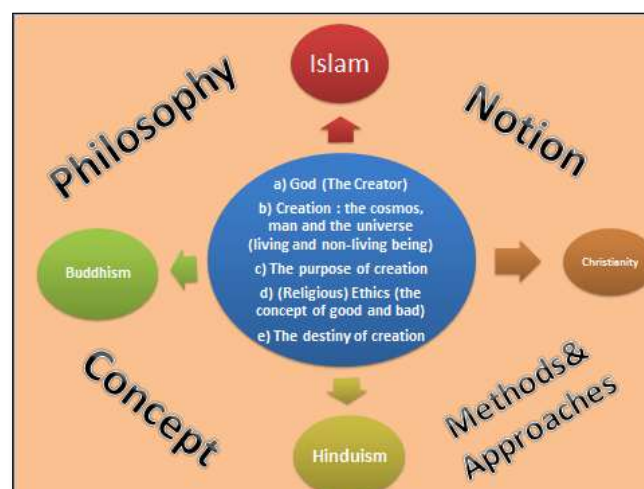


Table 1

The profile systematizes data on religions in Malaysia in appreciation of the local/national set up that embarks upon the common (permanent) as well as distinctive (dynamics) religious issues. Expert in religious studies may rightly criticize that, the themes under the permanent, blend the following philosophical issues; ontological, theological, moral and eschatological. In addition, with regard to the methods, the profile recognizes various methods adopted by religions; revelatory, reasoning, experiential, inspirational and meditational. Will the variety of themes and methods be able to do justice on the religions under study?

As reasoned out earlier, we aim to go beyond the phenomenological approaches. We intend to surpass the limit of ethical approach on inter-faith discourses which uphold the idea that the only possible common ground in religion lies in ethics. We aim to go beyond the theological approach which focuses on defending one's own religious truth and confronting others. The profile therefore is neutral in that the five themes under the permanent category are not exclusive issues limited to particular religions. On the other hand, the dynamic celebrate the diverse philosophy, notion, concepts, methods and approaches towards the permanent thus conserving religion of its own identity.

At the very best level, the profile seeks to alleviate prejudices and facilitates a more academic and intellectual approach on inter-faith issues. Inter-faith engagement in Malaysia requires more than commitment to the local/national history, inter-faith community service, charity works, and particularly inter-faith dialogue. The profile therefore supposes that the following as pre-requisites in an inter-faith endeavor; knowledge of one's own religion, readiness to learn about others, avoidance of one's religious sentiments, prejudices and biasness, and constructive critical abilities.

The profile allows religion to be introduced and discussed critically without having to resort to polemical defense and attack of one's religion. The profile refrains from religious dogmatic propagation for it is essential that every article discusses about religion to make sense or otherwise it creates confusion and uncertainty. The profile casts-off inter-faith engagement based on sentiments, prejudices and predispositions. The profile acknowledges plurality of religions in that religions are different even though they may share some overlapping themes. Most importantly, the profile invites any religious adherent to exercise his rational abilities in matters pertaining to his own and other religious truth.



## Conclusion

This paper is a research-based write up on religions and inter-faith relation in Malaysia. It advocates a novel approach in managing data on religions and inter-faith relation. The greatest challenge for the research is to convince the importance of initiating our own scheme in dealing with plurality of religions in Malaysia. Our history offers one of the perspectives that justify our co-existences. We however need to be more constructive and realistic in handling co-existences. We used to perceive issues pertaining to religions and inter-faith relation as too sensitive and delicate to be discussed openly. Thus, we have to move beyond presumptions and cultivate a more learned attitude and aptitude to deal with our differences. To start off, we introduce the profile to the participated religious organizations in Malaysia. The feedbacks we gained are astonishingly encouraging.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Asma, A. (2003). *Understanding Multicultural Malaysia: Delights, Puzzles and Irritations*. Petaling Jaya: Pearson.
- Bari, A. A. (2008). *Constitution of Malaysia: Text and Commentary*. Petaling Jaya: Prentice Hall.
- Bryne, P. (1995). *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Chiew, H. T. (1993). *Chinese Belief and Practices in South East Asia*. Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publication.
- Corfield, J. J. (1991). *Religion in West Malaysia and Singapore*. University of Hull, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies.
- F. Yousif, A. (1998). *Religious Freedom, Minorities and Islam: An Inquiry into the Malaysian Experience*. Kuala Lumpur: Thinker's Library.
- Fattah, I. A. (2002). *Al-Fikr al-Dini fi Muwajahat Tahaddiyat al-Hadathah*. Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press.
- Hasan, K. &. (2008). Religions and Belief. In A. S. Abdul Hamid, *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia*. Singapore: Archipelago Press.
- James, G. A. (1995). *Interpreting Religions: the Phenomenological Approaches of Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saisaye, W.Bede Kristensen and Gerardus ca der Leeuw*. Washington DC: The Catholic University of American Press.
- Mohd Sulaiman, M. M. (2006). *Religions in Malaysia*. Petaling Jaya: s.n.

Panikkar, R. (1995). Philosophical Pluralism and The Plurality of Religions. In T. Dean, *Religious Pluralism and Truth* (p. 34). New York: State University of New York Press.

Smart, N. (1973). *The Phenomenon of Religion*. London: MacMilan.

Thoha, A. M. (2009). The Western Conception of Objectivity and Scientific. *Intellectual Discourse*, 17(1), 83-92.